



# API Research Note

Issue No. 8, March 2016

## Girls as the New Weapons of Terror in West Africa

FLORENCE GICHOYA

Africa is in the thralls of a growing specter of gender-based violent extremism. The role of women in violent extremism has grown in tandem with the spiraling threat of terrorism globally. West Africa is the most affected region by terrorism and gender-based violent extremism. The region has turned to be a terrorists' playground—judged by the number of attacks launched by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram and other extremist groups. The well-coordinated attacks targeting foreigners and local elites have left behind a trail of deaths, injuries and destroyed property. The intensity and frequency of the terror attacks could have dire effects on the political stability and economic growth of the region.

### *Extremists Galore*

On March 16, 2016, two young female suicide bombers walked into a Mosque in Borno State, Nigeria, and detonated their suicide vests leaving 22 dead. The attack was one of the many unleashed by extremists linked to the Boko Haram terror group founded in 2002 in Maiduguri, Nigeria. The insurgency has been responsible for terror attacks in Africa's most populous nation since 2002 with recent spillovers to the neighbouring countries. Last year the group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Because of the nature its violence, it earned the title of the most deadly terror organization in the world.

Another West Africa-based terror group is AQIM, founded in 2007 in Algeria. Since November 2015, the group has launched well-timed attacks targeting foreigners. Experts opine that AQIM is carrying out more lethal attacks in efforts to counter ISIS' growing influence in the region.

AQIM claimed responsibility for the March 13 terror attack in Grand Bassam, Cote d'Ivoire – a beach resort that is frequented by tourists and expatriates. The group claimed responsibility for the death of 19 casualties, claiming it was a revenge mission for “our brothers recently killed by France” in Mali. World leaders condemned the Bassan attack, with Cote d'Ivoire's President Alassane Ouattara saying that, “Ivory Coast will not allow

itself to be intimidated by terrorists. Ivory Coast is standing up, standing up to protect its people.”

On January 18, 2016, AQIM attacked Hotel Splendid in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, killing 28 people. Though the hotel’s main clients were foreigners, majority of the victims were Burkinabe. The militants demanded the immediate withdrawal of French troops from Mali, and castigated France for neo-colonial tendencies.

Summing up the impact of spiraling terrorism, Clive Watts, Senior Fellow with Foreign Policy Research Institute aptly remarked in November 2015 that: “the world is now threatened by parallel, competing jihadist networks and a host of upstart terror groups on three continents attempting to outpace one another through spectacular attacks.” The more deadly the attacks are, the more publicity a terrorist group gets. Targeting women has enhanced this publicity. Young girls are also targets of recruitment in the efforts by the groups to radicalize and recruit new fighters.

### *Gender-based Violent Extremism*

*In their article, “Women, Gender and the evolving tactics of Boko Haram” (February 10, 2014), Jacob Zenn and Elizabeth Pearson highlights gender-based violence (GBV) and its targeting of women as an under-researched aspect of Boko Haram’s activities. The year 2013 marked a significant evolution in Boko Haram’s tactic of kidnapping women as the new feature of the instrumental use of women as targets of extremist war.*

Boko Haram bounced into the world stage on April 14, 2014, when its militants kidnapped more than 250 schoolgirls from Chibok in North Eastern Nigeria’s Borno State. The girls were reportedly hidden in unknown remote areas within the vast region from Nigeria to Cameroon, Chad and as far as Central African Republic’s Birao region near Sudan.

The instrumental use of women by extremists became clear on May 12 when Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau proposed that “if you want us to release your girls that we kidnapped, you must release our brethren that are held in Borno, Yobe, Kano, Kaduna, Enugu and Lagos states, as well as Abuja.” In a video released almost a month later on May 5, 2014, Shekau upped the ante threatening to “sell” the schoolgirls as “slaves in the market.”

### *Girls as New Weapons of War*

In addition to targeting women, Boko Haram’s war strategy has shifted to including women in its operations. The increasing role of women in Boko Haram’s terrorist strategy is predicated on the militia’s ideology and culture that enables it to maximize on the use of women in violence. Boko Haram’s targeting of women in its operations is a tactical response to corresponding tactics by the Nigerian security forces, which have increased pressure on male extremists and frustrated its efforts.

The first Boko Haram female suicide bomber in Nigeria attacked a military barracks on February 2014. She detonated her suicide vest shortly before she could go through the security check point, one soldier was killed. Since then, Boko Haram’s new tactic involves enlisting dozens of women and girls to carry out suicide missions, with some girls as young as 10 years old.

The mosque bombing in Nigeria was not the first time Boko Haram had used female suicide bombers to carry out such attacks. Recently, two female suicide bombers killed 58 people in an internally displaced Persons Camp (IDP) located in Borno State. On January 10, 2016, two female suicide bombers launched an attack in a mosque in Cameroon, killing 10 people.

Nigerian writer, Theophilus Llevbare, in his article, *Little Girls as Weapons of War*, opined that, terrorist organizations use girls, because they are easier to work with in terms of planning, and they are inexpensive. In relation to their low social status in some cultures, they are willing casualties for the latest jihadi trend. “When a human bomb mission is accomplished, it attracts higher shock value and more media coverage if it involves a female ‘martyr’. They have earned the dubious distinction of appearing more newsworthy than their male counterparts. In strengthening these unique capabilities, women make up to 65 percent of all assassinations among groups that use female suicide terrorists. As a motivating factor, suicide homicide is perceived as a way to achieve equal social status with men.” Llevbare wrote.

Globally, there is a rise of female suicide bombers. In Ankara, Turkey, a 24 year old woman blew herself up in a busy bus station killing 37 people, on March 13, 2016.

### ***Countering Extremism***

The United Nations has raised alarm on the rise of terror attacks in West Africa. Mohammed Chambas, Head of UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA) and UN Secretary General’s Special Representative indicated that, “violent extremism and terrorist activities remain a major threat to security and development in West Africa, further aggravating the region’s humanitarian challenges.” No country in West Africa is secure from Boko Haram’s continued use of young boys and girls for suicide attacks.” The group continues its indiscriminate attacks against civilians not only in Nigeria, but also in Niger, Chad and Cameroon.

There is hope that Boko Haram can (and will) be defeated, and there is some progress made towards this direction. In addition to military approaches, policy experts are urging for softer methods of draining the swamps of violent extremism. Chambas called on West and Central Africa countries to develop strategies, which will address the root causes of the insurgency, and notably the underlying socio-economic grievances of marginalized communities.

Amid escalating threat of terrorism, on February 2013, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) launched a regional counter terrorism strategy and implementation plan in Yamoussoukro, Cote d’Ivoire. The forum identified the key causes of terrorism in the region as political instability, presence of radical Islamic terrorist groups and the vast un-policed Sahel region. ECOWAS’ strategy of countering violent extremism and terrorism places emphasis on the need for regional and international cooperation among states, especially in the area of intelligence sharing and investigations of terror cases.

In the recent wave of terror attacks in West Africa, France has taken a leading role in fighting terrorism, arguing that it has vested interests in its former colonies, which includes protecting its nationals. France, the former colonial master of Burkina Faso, Mali and Cote d’Ivoire has deployed French Special Forces to fight the insurgents. France has

a military presence in its former West African colonies currently totaling to over 3,500 troops in Burkina Faso, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The contingency is part of 'Operation Barkhane,' the French Counter terrorism strategy that was launched two on August 2014 by French President Francois Hollande.

For these counter-extremism measures to achieve their intended outcomes, it is urgent that actors seriously take into account the increasing role of gender-based extremism in the escalation of terrorism.

---

*Ms Florence Gachoya is a Research Fellow with the Nkrumah Center for African Affairs and Global Peace (AAGP) at the Africa Policy Institute, and an MA student at the Institute for Diplomacy and International Studies.*